

VZCZCXRO3644
RR RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV
DE RUEHAM #2052/01 1921022
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 101022Z JUL 08
FM AMEMBASSY AMMAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3026
INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHCP/AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN 0057
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE 0350

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 002052

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/10/2009
TAGS: [KISL](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: ISLAMIST WEEKLY SEEKS TO CHALLENGE MUSLIM
BROTHERHOOD DOMINANCE

Classified By: Charge Daniel Rubinstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Fact International ("al-Haqiqa al-Duwlia") Chairman Zakaria al-Sheikh told us recently that his Islamist weekly newspaper seeks to challenge the dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Islamist press. While his newspaper criticizes the Muslim Brotherhood and aims to "portray a moderate image of Islam," it routinely runs stridently anti-American and anti-Israeli articles. Sheikh, who describes himself as an Islamist, said his newspaper endorses giving Islam a wider role in Jordanian public life. The publication has gained attention in Jordan in the past two months for spearheading a boycott in Jordan of Danish and Dutch products in protest against the publication of controversial cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Danish newspapers and of the film "Fitna" produced by Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders. Declaring that "no one, including the Muslim Brotherhood, can own the Islamic movement," Sheikh concluded that his newspaper highlights the political diversity of the Islamic movement in Jordan. END SUMMARY.

"No One Owns the Islamic Movement"

¶2. (C) The Chairman of the Jordan-based Islamist weekly newspaper Fact International Zakaria al-Sheikh told us recently that one of the newspaper's goals is to illustrate that "it's not just the Muslim Brotherhood that is part of the Islamic movement." He stresses that in contrast to other Islamist publications in Jordan, such as the prominent Islamist weekly al-Sabeel, his newspaper is not affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Sheikh said his newspaper, which started in Amman in 1996, was created primarily to promote a moderate vision of Islam to "campaign against blatant distortions that are used to discredit the Arab and Muslim world." The newspaper is published by the Fact International Media and Research Institute, which Sheikh also co-founded. He said that his publication seeks to "represent the hopes and goals of the people in the region."

¶3. (C) Fact International began as a small operation in Amman in 1996. Sheikh stated that while on frequent visits to Pretoria, South Africa, he was approached by Muslims from South Africa and other countries to publish Fact internationally in different languages. "I then decided that we should go international, and present the news to people in their own language," he explained. The newspaper subsequently began a "joint venture" with a Fact International office in South Africa, and started publishing in Arabic and English.

¶4. (C) Since then, the newspaper has developed relationships with journalists in other countries, publishing articles from its Cairo office and from reporters based in Damascus, the West Bank, and the Gulf. Sheikh said that his newspaper has "unlimited potential for worldwide expansion," and hopes eventually to publish the newspaper in a variety of languages

including Malay and French. Sheikh estimates that the newspaper's print circulation in the Middle East is approximately 22,000 per week, with 6,000 copies published in Jordan, 10,000 in Egypt, and 6,000 in Lebanon (NOTE: By contrast, the readership of Jordan's oldest major weekly, al-Shihan, is estimated to be 10,000 per week, though the weekly prints significantly more copies. END NOTE). The newspaper is available on-line at www.factjo.com, and claims on-line readership across the world. Reflecting its growth, Fact International recently moved into high-tech offices in the upscale Amman neighborhood of Swefieh. As Fact International expands, Sheikh said his newspaper illustrates that "no one, including the Muslim Brotherhood, can own the Islamic movement."

Gaining Attention for Anti-Danish and Anti-Dutch Stands

15. (C) Fact International has gained attention in Jordan in recent months for spearheading a public campaign calling for a boycott of Danish and Dutch goods. The newspaper said it is acting in response to the publication of controversial cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Danish newspapers and the production of the film "Fitna," which is critical of Islam, by Dutch far-right parliamentarian Geert Wilders. Supporters of the boycott, entitled the "Messenger of Allah Unites Us Campaign" and using the slogan "Live Without It (Danish and Dutch products)," claim that they influenced Amman's Prosecutor General to recently issue five charges against Wilders. Highlighting the newspaper's close affiliation with the anti-Wilders campaign, Fact's July 2 issue ran a large color photo of Wilders on its front page publicizing the

AMMAN 00002052 002 OF 003

charges against him.

16. (C) Though the boycott campaign was joined by other Islamist publications and some local businesses and members of parliament, the boycott has raised Fact International's public profile in Jordan due to its leading role in the effort. "From the feedback we received on the Messenger of Allah Unites Us Campaign, we are greatly inspired and encouraged to learn there are some really good spin-offs that we did not really anticipate (from this campaign)," Sheikh recently wrote. "It is time to stand up and defend Islam against the relentless and ever-increasing attacks, no matter how high the odds."

17. (C) The newspaper also gained attention in June when it was one of the first print publications to headline alleged remarks, later proved false, by U.S. scholar Robert Kagan. The newspaper, citing a blog, claimed that Kagan, an advisor to Senator McCain's presidential campaign, gave a speech at New York University promoting "the Jordanian option," in which Jordan would be used as "the Palestinian state" in lieu of a state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Note: The McCain campaign later issued a statement denying support for "the Jordanian option," and noting that Kagan denied ever making the remarks and that the alleged speech at New York University never took place. End Note). Despite basing its report on false internet stories, Fact's front page coverage of the alleged Kagan remarks (along with significant coverage by Jordanian internet media outlet ammoneews.net) helped create a firestorm in the Jordanian media leading to days of coverage of the story in Jordan's mainstream, leading daily newspapers. When PDoff pointed out to Sheikh that Kagan never made the remarks, he maintained that printing the story was still the right decision "because many others have said similar things, including powerful people in the U.S. government and think tanks."

Coverage Criticizes U.S., Israel, and Muslim Brotherhood

18. (C) Though Fact International stresses its desire to promote "a moderate vision of Islam," the newspaper's

coverage of the U.S. and Israel is decidedly inflammatory. Its July 2 issue included articles entitled: "Arab Archaeologists Warn Against Israeli Schemes to Destroy al-Aqsa Mosque" and "Egypt Lost Regional Influence Because of Being Subordinate to the U.S." Another article alleged a "Zionist role" in tensions between Fatah and Hamas. According to Sheikh, these stories "tell the truth" and balance what he perceives as biased, "anti-Islam" coverage in the western media.

¶9. (C) While critical of the U.S. and Israel, the newspaper is also critical of the Muslim Brotherhood. For example, in a November 19, 2007 article, the newspaper published a "study" on the Brotherhood entitled "Legitimate Organization or Political Front" that concluded "the Muslim Brotherhood always undermines any Islamic activity by other groups and will not allow any other group or individual Muslim to threaten its existence. The Muslim Brotherhood does not hesitate to distort the image of anyone working in the name of Islam outside its umbrella of influence or as an alternative to it or that is critical of its performance." Opining that the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan has "cleverly used . . . its political arm, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) . . . to achieve political gains and popularity," the article concludes that "the term 'Islamic movement' is clearly associated with the Muslim Brotherhood at both the regional and international levels. The possible reason behind this is the absence of an alternative well-organized Islamic group in Arab and Islamic countries as a result of the Muslim Brotherhood's hegemonic control over any activity related to Islam."

¶10. (C) Fact International staff acknowledge that observers have sometimes had difficulty characterizing the publication's political orientation. "I think that people, including the government, have a hard time figuring out exactly where we stand, because we are Islamist but not with the Brotherhood. Even the Iranian ambassador came to meet with us recently to try to figure us out. He said he saw a lot of good coverage, but wondered why we sometimes criticized the Muslim Brotherhood," Fact International contributor Marwan Shehadeh, an associate of Sheikh and editor of the "Islamouna" Islamist website, said. However, Shehadeh said the newspaper "knows its limits" in how far it can go in criticizing the GOJ. "Fact knows the limits. It criticizes the U.S., Israel, and sometimes the Brotherhood. But when it comes to Jordan, you can criticize the government up to a point, but not further. And you can never criticize

AMMAN 00002052 003 OF 003

the royal family," he said. "Legally, we have had no trouble, except for one time when we printed an interview with a Muslim scholar the government didn't like, and we were asked to stop talking to him by the security services," he added.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: While Fact International is still a small publication in comparison to Jordan's leading dailies and weeklies, it is growing and seeking to expand internationally. Its role in promoting news stories that have subsequently been carried by the mainstream Jordanian media, even those based on questionable facts like the false reports of Robert Kagan's remarks on Jordan, illustrates that Fact International is a player on the Jordanian media scene. Its campaign calling for a boycott of Danish and Dutch goods has further raised its profile. But Fact International's most significant distinction may be its contribution to the diversity of Islamist media in Jordan, with its insistence that Islamist publications associated with the Muslim Brotherhood "do not speak for the whole Islamic movement." END COMMENT.
Rubinstein